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ABSTRACT

Although it is impossible to know in advance the credibility of political messages, such persuasive discourse can be analyzed in a non-partisan, common sense way using predictable patterns in content and form. The content of a candidate's message can be summarized as "I am competent and trustworthy; from me, you'll get 'more good' and 'less bad.'" However individuals define good and bad, expect from those speaking to the haves a conservative rhetoric stressing protection of the good and prevention of the bad, and expect from those speaking to the have-nots a progressive rhetoric stressing relief from the bad and acquisition of the good. The "pitch" and the "pep talk" are two common forms of persuasion. Listeners can evaluate the five-part pitch strategy by asking what techniques were used to get the listeners' attention, to build confidence in the speaker's trustworthiness, and to stimulate desire for the product or program. Listeners can also ask whether any urgency stressing techniques were used, and what response the speaker was seeking. The pep talk, which seeks committed collective action, usually follows a pattern of threat/bonding/cause/response. Listeners can evaluate this pattern by asking what the threat is, what words and nonverbal messages were used to bond the group, what the cause being defended is, and what response the speaker was seeking. (HTH)

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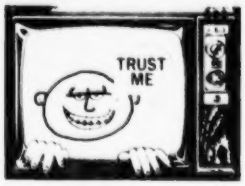

Images & Issues

How To Analyze Election Rhetoric

People often complain vaguely about political language ("all promises...all lies...too confusing") or ignore it, drop out, because they don't understand some basics. Appreciate free elections: using words and images (not force and violence), persuaders seek support for themselves, their ideas.

Prepare yourself to analyze political language in a non-partisan, common sense way. We don't know in advance whether a message is true or not, beneficial or not, cogent or not, practical or not; but we do know some predictable patterns in content and form.

CONTENT. The core message of a candidate can be basically summarized as: **"I am competent and trustworthy; from me, you'll get more 'good' and less 'bad.'"** This sentence contains three claims (competent, trustworthy, benevolent—as in Aristotle's *ethos*) and a promise of benefits. If politicians are "always promising," remember we are always benefit-seeking: no matter how we define "good" and "bad," we want to get and keep the "good" and to avoid or change the "bad." Thus:

- Expect, from the HAVES, a **conservative** rhetoric stressing protection (keep the "good") and prevention (avoid the "bad").
- Expect from the HAVE-NOTS, a **progressive** rhetoric stressing relief (change the "bad") and acquisition (get the "good").

FORM. The "pitch" and the "pep talk" are terms used here to describe two commonly-seen patterns of persuasion, the structure underneath most messages. **The "pitch"** is basically a five-part strategy, usually seen in commercial advertising, but also common in political ads: Ask these questions:

1. **What attention-getting techniques are used?** (Often, simple repetition for name-recognition; thus, many posters, buttons, TV spots.)
2. **What confidence-building techniques are used?** (To project the "image" of being competent, trustworthy, benevolent: note the smiles, handshakes, sincere look; the endorsements; the patriotic associations).
3. **What desire-stimulating techniques are used?** (Conservatives and progressives emphasize different aspects, stimulating desires for "goods" and fears of "bads." Commercial ads focus on specific, individual benefits; political ads on general, social benefits: peace, prosperity, honest and efficient government. Everyone agrees on these as general goals, but disagrees about the specific means to them.)
4. **Are there urgency-stressing techniques used?** (Common in campaigns; sometimes an intense "now-or-never, before-it's-too-late" plea.)
5. **What response is sought?** (Often, simply to vote for a person or party.)

The "pep talk" seeks committed collective action. It's less common, but more intense, stirring emotions of fear or anger, as in party rallies, single-issue or "cause" groups, war propaganda, and in targeted direct-mail. Often, the "pep talk" pattern is: Threat/Bonding/Cause/Response. Ask these questions:

1. **What is the threat feared?** (The danger? The possible loss? Who are the foes? The victims? The warning-givers? What "horror stories" told?)
2. **What words and nonverbals are used in bonding the group?** (marching, singing, cheering; symbols, uniforms - stressing unity, loyalty, and quality)
3. **What is the "cause" defended?** (What duty words used?-should, ought, must; What defense words - save, protect, help; What "other" needs the defending? - the nation, the people, the workers, the poor, the children, the animals, the environment.)
4. **What response is sought?** (Simply, to vote? Or more? - join, enlist, work, fight, picket, march, crusade, give, donate.)

Analysis of form and content is limited: it does not examine truth or deception, accuracy or error, intent or consequences; but it's a useful start. Our ultimate goal? Knowledge, understanding, insight, tolerance, perhaps even compassion.

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